PHIL 470 – Trust in the Digital Age

Winter 2024 – T 2:35 pm-3:55 pm and R 2:35 pm-3:55 pm
Alexis Morin-Martel
BIRKS 203
alexis.morin-martel@mail.mcgill.ca
Office Hours: After classes (and by appointment)

Overview

We trust a lot. We trust our friends not to reveal our embarrassing secrets, our partners to keep their promises, and our surgeons to operate on the right organs. Moreover, because of the hyper-specialization of knowledge in contemporary societies, being good citizens often requires us to trust people we don't know, such as experts, and to form beliefs based on their testimony. Yet many believe that we currently face a crisis of trust, a crisis characterized by a distrust of experts and public institutions and partly fueled by the polarization of online discourse.

This course's aim is twofold. In the first place, we will seek to provide a conceptual analysis of trust by surveying some of the most important philosophical accounts of trust and trustworthiness. In the second place, we will turn to epistemic and ethical issues related to trust, with a special emphasis on how the prevalence of virtual communities impacts social trust. Among other things, we will see how philosophical accounts of trust and distrust help us understand phenomena like echo chambers, the proliferation of fake news, as well as new forms of virtual social solidarity.

Readings and announcements

All readings will be made available as PDFs on MyCourses. In addition, all announcements will also be posted there, and this is where you'll turn in your assignments. This site is important. Make sure you familiarize yourself with it.

Assessment

Reading Responses	25%
Final Paper Proposal	20%
Referee Report	10%
Final Paper	45%

Participation

You are expected to attend every class, complete all assigned readings, and to participate actively and respectfully in each meeting (by raising questions and/or making comments).

Reading Responses

Throughout the semester, you will submit **five responses** to the readings (worth 5% each). These will be due at 10 am on the day when we are scheduled to discuss the paper, which will be announced ahead of time. The length of your reading responses should be approx. 400 words. Only one reading response will be accepted per meeting. Your responses should either motivate and raise a thoughtful question about the reading or develop a critical response to (an aspect of) the reading. Make sure to first explain in your own words the author's argument you are engaging with. Your reading responses must be submitted to the appropriate folder under 'Assignments' on myCourses. **Late submissions won't be accepted for credit.**

Final Paper Proposal

By **Tuesday, March 12**, you'll submit a 750-word proposal for your final paper. This should include a brief introduction to your topic, a sketch of your main argument, some objections you'll address, and your (tentative) replies. It should also include a reading list, which doesn't count towards the word total. A guide to writing your proposal will be available on myCourses (under 'Content'). I will be available and happy to meet to discuss your topic as you prepare your proposal. The proposal must be submitted to the appropriate folder under 'Assignments' on myCourses.

Referee Report

You will exchange rough drafts of your final papers with another student and provide a "referee report" on a peer's draft that gives comments and feedback. As a guide, I will make a sample referee report available on the myCourses site (under 'Content'). Roughly, the report should summarize the draft and respectfully identify its weaknesses and strengths, providing guidance about how the author might improve it. You must submit to your partner and me a rough draft of your paper by the start of our scheduled last class meeting (**Tuesday, April 9**). You must submit to your partner and me your referee report by Tuesday, April 16.

Final Paper

Your final paper should be around 3,000 words, give or take 10%. You will submit with it a response to your "referee" (no more than 500 words) which explains the revisions you made in light of their report. If you decide not to revise in light of certain of the referee's suggestions, you must explain why in your letter. I will make a sample letter available on myCourses. Both your paper and your letter must be submitted to the appropriate folder under 'Assignments' on myCourses. They will be due by **Tuesday, April 23**. You are strongly encouraged to meet with me several times to discuss your paper. I am more than happy to talk with you about your topic, give you reading recommendations, and to provide writing guidance.

Late Work Policy

I'm happy to consider requests for the final paper and the final paper proposal, but ask that you please make the request at least two business days prior to the due date and provide a proper justification. Assignments that have been submitted late without an extension or exception will be penalized 5% per day.

Language Policy

In accordance with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Academic Integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for further information).

Topics and Schedule of Readings (*Tentative List*)

January 4 – Introduction
- Recommended: Carolyn McLeod, "Trust"

1. **Major conceptual accounts of trust**

January 9, 11 and 16 – Motives-based and non-motives-based views of trust
- Annette Baier, "Trust and Antitrust"
- Richard Holton, "Deciding to trust, coming to believe"

January 18, 23 and 25 – Doxastic accounts of trust
- Pamela Hieronymi, "The Reason for Trust"
- Arnon Keren "Trust and belief: A preemptive reasons account"

January 30, February 1 – Affective accounts of trust
- Karen Jones, "Trust, Distrust, and Affective Looping"

February 6, 8 and 13 – Trustworthiness
- Karen Frost-Arnold, "Imposters, Tricksters, and Trustworthiness as an Epistemic Virtue"
- Karen Jones, "Trustworthiness"

2. **The public trust crisis**

February 20 – Trust in experts
- Maria Baghramian and Michel Croce, "Experts, Public Policy, and the Question of Trust"

February 22

- **No class**

February 27 and 29
- Helen De Cruz, "Believing to Belong: Addressing the Novic-Expert Problem in Polarized Scientific Communication"
- C. Thi Nguyen, "Transparency is Surveillance"

March 5 and March 7

- **Reading Break**

March 12, 14, and 19 – Social media and epistemic practices
- Vikram B. Bhargava and Manuel Velasquez, "Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction"
- Regina Rini, "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology"
- Dan Williams, "The Marketplace of Rationalizations"

March 21

- **No class**

March 26, 29 and April 2 – Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles
- C. Thi Nguyen, "Escape the Echo Chamber"
- Jeremy Fantl, "Fake News vs. Echo Chambers"

April 4, 9 and 11 – **TBD**